DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 289 PS 013 059

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TITLE Involving Parents in Your School--Parents and Teachers Together!
INSTITUTION North Dakota Univ., Grand Forks. Center for Teaching and Learning.
PUB DATE Oct 82
NOTE 13p.; Subtitle, "Parent Conferencing: A Way to Make a Difference."
JOURNAL CIT Insights; v15 n2 Oct 1982.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Check Lists; Elementary Education; Guidelines; Parent School Relationship; *Parent Teacher Conferences; *Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Parent conferencing is a way to dramatically improve home/school relationships. Parent conferences, at their very best, provide the teacher with useful information about individual students. More importantly, however, they create a parent/teacher team atmosphere, with each member contributing his or her knowledge and experience for the benefit of the individual child. Although parent conferences already appear to be valued by educators (most schools have them once or twice a year), it seems that only few teachers have received formal training in the area. Steps necessary for establishing a successful parent contact at the elementary level include pre-conference plans, conference activities, and the post-conference follow-up. (Detailed descriptions of the activities involved in each of these steps are provided, along with a checklist designed to assist the teacher in attaining conference goals.) (MP)

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CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
GRAND FORKS 58202

Volume 15, Number 2
October 1982

PARENTS AND TEACHERS TOGETHER!

BY MARY LOU FULLER

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Parent Conferencing: A Way To Make A Difference

By Mary Lou Fuller
University of North Dakota

There is a way to dramatically improve home/school relationships, and it is through better parent/teacher conferencing. These relationships improve because good parent conferences, at the very least, provide the teacher with useful information about individual students. But more importantly, they create a parent/teacher team atmosphere with each member contributing their knowledge and experience for the benefit of the individual child.

Even though the teacher and parent share a common interest--children--the teacher often sees the parent as an extraneous person in the "educational environment." If the parent/teacher team is to function, parents and teachers must see each other in proper perspective: Teachers must see parents as the true authorities on their child(ren), and parents must see teachers as specialists in instruction. Nicholas Hobbs (1978) puts the relationship into proper focus:

> *Parents have to be recognized as special educators, the true experts on their children; and professional people--teachers, physicians, psychologists, and others--have to learn to be consultants to parents.*[1]

The parent/teacher conference provides an already existing structure to facilitate a working, sharing relationship of the kind Hobbs suggests. However, these kinds of relationships do not just happen; they require effort.

> *It has been noted that effective, cooperative relationships between school and home are based on a developed trust between two partners. Since trust can only develop when individuals have an opportunity to work together and interact, it is critical that teachers do everything possible to maximize the positive aspects of their contact with parents. Especially through personal contacts such as conferences. Therefore, it is essential that the teacher use all*

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1 "A Conversation with Nicholas Hobbs on Exceptional Children," Exceptional Children, April 1978, p. 44.

of his/her skills in adequate preparation, climate setting, and communication, to make the most of each interaction.[2]

Parent conferences already appear to be valued by educators--after all, most schools have them once or twice a year. Unfortunately, few teachers have received formal training in parent/teacher conferencing, and this means they may miss the full value of the conference. Happily, the most useful conferencing skills can be learned in a relatively short time through inservice training and/or professional reading. And, indeed, the purpose of this Insights is to assist the elementary school teachers with those conferencing skills. For the sake of convenience, they are presented under the headings of (1) pre-conference plans, (2) conference activity and (3) post-conference follow-up. A check list following this same format is located at the end of this paper. The check list was originally prepared at the Institute for Parent Involvement, University of New Mexico.

Kay and Greg Johnson are nervously anticipating their first parent/teacher conference in their daughter Terri's new school. Terri is a vivacious, active ten year old who is very special to her parents. Terri is an "average" student and her parents' unspoken fear is that the teacher will see her as an "average" person. Their overt agenda for the parent/teacher conference is to hear a report of Terri's academic progress; their unspoken agenda includes their hope to find that the teacher likes Terri and appreciates her uniqueness.

Chris Smith's been teaching for a few years, but this is the first year at Olson Elementary School. Because he's "new," he's viewing upcoming parent/teacher conferences with more than his usual concern. His overt agenda, of course, is to let the parents know how their children are doing, to be supportive of good work and to see if he can "team up" with some parents to help their children have happier, more productive school years. But he has a hidden agenda, too: He wants the parents to leave the conference thinking that he is a concerned teacher who knows children and is helping them become happy-productive students.

PRE-CONFERENCE

The success of a parent conference starts with pre-conference planning: It sets the stage, organizes the material and gives the teacher the confidence that comes from being well prepared. Pre-conference activity should start with an examination of the parent population for whom the conference is intended, and should address issues such as: What are

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[2] Roger Kroth, ed., Parent Involvement Center, University of New Mexico, Strategies for Effective Parent-Teacher Interaction, Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare Grant, April 1980, p. 93.

the special needs of this group? Are most of these people working parents? If the majority of the parents are employed, conferences may have to be scheduled before school, during lunch hour, or during the evening hours. It is important to remember that inviting parents to conferences they cannot attend frustrates parents and suggests a lack of sensitivity on the part of the school. For example, over 21% of all families are single parent households, usually headed by women. Since most of these women are paid hourly wages, a conference scheduled during the school hours (8:30 a.m.-4:00 p.m.) may force the parent to choose between less food on the table (because of reduced wages) or feelings of guilt over not being able to attend the conference. Neither alternative is conducive to good school/home relations, and both point to the importance of scheduling conferences at times parents find convenient. Some school districts accomplish this by scheduling conference days from 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., providing a workable schedule for both parents and teachers.

A related problem is babysitting. Some parents find child care costs prohibitive and appreciate sitting services on the school campus at conference times. Scouts, parent volunteers and babysitters paid for by PTA/PTO are ways various schools have resolved this problem. Providing such services both allows parents to attend and makes a positive statement about how the school values parent conferences.

NOTIFY

After determining a conference time schedule that encourages and allows parental participation, the next step is to notify parents.

Parent notification should include the conference's purpose, place, time and length of time allotted. A map of the school plant with the teacher's room clearly marked is also useful, as is a cordial phone call to the parent(s) several days in advance of the conference--a call serving to remind and encourage reluctant parents. Parent volunteers may do the telephoning since some parents find schools threatening and filled with hurtful childhood memories; a call from another parent may reassure them that they are valued and seen as an important part of the team.

PREPARE

The next step, and perhaps the most important, is preparation for the conference itself. Pre-conference preparation includes a thorough teacher review of the student's school experience, both academic and social. Parents like to see examples of their children's work and this can be done in a variety of creative ways. Some teachers have found audio tapes to be good at demonstrating points they wish to make (e.g., tape recorded samples of a child's reading allows the parent(s) to hear the student's reading skills with the teacher). Additionally, the tape can be kept and compared with subsequent tapes at later conferences.

Polaroid pictures of a student participating in an activity adds another dimension to conferences and helps parents visualize their

children in the classroom. Teachers are also using videotape equipment as it becomes available in school districts; it gives parents an opportunity to see their children interacting in an academic and social setting. Slides, movies, student drawn pictures, video and audio tapes, etc., all help set the stage as well as providing information on classroom activities in general, and individual children in particular.

Teachers traditionally prepare a folder of work samples representative of each child's academic performance. Too often the samples are less representative of the child's total work, and more indicative of problem areas. This is unfortunate because parents need to be as aware of the child's strengths as they are of his/her weaknesses; it is important to include examples of the child's best work as well as samples of problem areas.

Since conference time is usually limited, it is wise to have all the material (for parents) organized and ready to present. An agenda also helps expedite the conference: An agenda lists priorities for the conference and then provides a structure for considering them.

Plan Agenda

Prepare an agenda and share it with the parent(s). Teachers can be certain that parental concerns are part of the agenda by sending it home several days in advance and requesting that parents add their concerns and return the list to school. This procedure produces an agenda addressing everyone's concerns and interests, and also allows parent(s) time to think about information that might aid the teacher in better understanding the child. A note of warning: A good agenda keeps a conference on task, but it should never dominate a conference.

Arranging the Environment

With the agenda planned, it is time to deal with the physical arrangement of the classroom.

The classroom should be welcoming and create a comfortable atmosphere. Comfort means providing adult size chairs for all conference participants. Although teachers are used to sitting on student size chairs, parents aren't. Comfort also means hospitality, and offering parents coffee or other refreshments helps establish a warm atmosphere where both the teacher and parent(s) can feel comfortable. It is also a good idea to arrange the seating so that materials presented for parents' examination are easily accessible.

Never sit behind a desk. The message this communicates to a parent(s) is that the teacher's role is that of an authority figure--rather than a team member--and that parents are cast in the role of students.

Pre-conference activities provide the organization upon which successful conferences are built. When the teacher has (1) notified the

parents, (2) planned the agenda, (3) prepared samples of the child's work and (4) arranged the environment, the conference is set to run smoothly.

Kay and Greg Johnson received the notice of the parent/teacher conference followed by a copy of the conference agenda. They were glad to know what would be discussed and were pleased that their input had been requested. Kay and Greg have been discussing information they want to share with Mr. Smith and have some questions they want to ask. They are also pleased with the school-provided babysitting service as things have been a little tight this month.

Terri's parents are feeling considerably less anxious about the conference than they originally were and are, in fact, looking forward to meeting with Mr. Smith.

Even though Chris Smith knows that parent/teacher conferences should result in a positive exchange of information, his past experience didn't quite reach this goal. This year he is trying a more organized, professional approach in hopes of realizing the potential of conferencing. He has a couple of three minute videotapes of his class in action, a folder of each child's work, and has sent home notices of the conference. Chris has a well-planned agenda and has spent time making the physical environment comfortable and welcoming. He is still somewhat anxious, but is beginning to look forward to the parent conferences.

CONFERENCE

WELCOME

Establish a positive rapport by standing as the parent(s) enter the room and greeting each of them by name. Be certain that you know the parents' names: Check the school records because the parents' name may not be the same as the child's, and some parents are quite sensitive about this issue.

STATE OPERATIONAL ASPECTS

After the initial greeting, briefly state the purpose of the conference and the time limitation. Present the agenda and invite the parent(s) to add their additional interests and concerns. It is a good idea to have a clock in view so that the parent(s) can plan their conversations according to time available; it is frustrating for all involved to find time has run out and important concerns still remain. A five-minute warning before the close of the conference (e.g., "We have five minutes left.") will allow the discussion of special concerns or questions and facilitate a comfortable closure.

Note taking is often a good idea. The teacher may wish to take notes both because it helps him/her remember important facts, and because

it suggests the teacher considers the parents' opinions to be of value.

Encourage Participation

During the conference, the teacher should encourage the sharing of information concerning the child and about those factors influencing the child's life. The teacher should create an atmosphere in which the parent(s) can feel free to ask questions and make comments.

Perhaps the most serious error made in conferences is the tendency of the teacher to do most of the talking and very little listening. To help encourage parents to contribute, pause frequently; pauses give the parent(s) an opportunity to respond. Questions work well, too; don't be afraid to solicit information and ask questions.

Watch for verbal and nonverbal cues which assist you in meeting the needs of the parent. Does the parent appear anxious and distraught? If so, don't ignore those unspoken statements as they are indicators of concern. Considering the time limitations of conferences, the direct approach is usually best since it is possible to be sensitive yet direct. One might say, "When we discussed Mark's reading progress, you appeared concerned." This sort of statement generally elicits an explanation which allows the teacher to address topics the parents are worried about.

Summarize

Summarize the conference and make certain that you have covered both the school agenda and the parents' concerns. If appropriate, a list of things to be done should be made for both parties. It should include the tasks the teacher and/or parent(s) have agreed upon, and a specific time to check on the progress of the agreement. (When this is the case, it is usually more convenient for the teacher to call the parent(s).) This list might include such items as the teacher's agreement to contact the reading specialist and the parents' agreement to help the child 15 minutes each school day with school provided materials, or taking the child to the ophthalmologist.

After briefly summarizing the conference and noting any further responsibilities the teacher and/or parents have assumed, bring closure to the conference by ending on a positive note. Parents send to school the very best they have and enjoy hearing positive statements about their children. A statement such as, "Please tell Terri that I appreciate her kindness to the other students" not only provides the parent with good feelings, but serves to notify Terri that her teacher and her parents see her positivity and that they are working in her best interest. Most parents are doing the very best job of parenting that they can and receive very little verbal recognition for their efforts; and since most parents see teachers as "authorities" on children, words of praise from teachers are doubly appreciated.

The conference is over and Greg and Kay feel as though they are an important part of Terri's school experience: Their opinions mattered. Kay was particularly interested in watching the videotape of the class and noticed Terri gazing out the window. (Teachers, in the past, had reported that behavior, but seeing it brought it home.) There had been a healthy exchange of information and honesty that was encouraged by Mr. Smith's professional attitude. From the warm welcome they received from Chris Smith to the final comment on Terri's kindness to others, the Johnsons had felt that they were a part of a well-planned, professional meeting designed to provide Terri with a quality educational experience. All of Terri's problems had not been magically solved but Kay and Greg felt that they and Mr. Smith were working towards their resolution. Most important was the knowledge that Terri's teacher liked her and appreciated her uniqueness. They felt secure in the fact that Chris Smith was a concerned teacher who knows children.

Chris Smith had met his goals for the parent/teacher conference: In fact, the conference had been even better than he had anticipated. Not every conference had been as productive as the Johnson's, but he felt good regardless. In each case he had provided the best framework possible and the quality of the end product spoke to the value of his expenditure of time and effort. Chris ended his parent/teacher conferences feeling good about himself and with a new appreciation of the potential of the parent/teacher team.

POST-CONFERENCE

Review Conference With Child

Most children feel some anxiety about parent/teacher conferences; the fact that the adults with the greatest power to affect a child's life are meeting causes concern to most children. Following a conference, a teacher should let each student know how enjoyable it was meeting their parents and give a brief synopsis of the conference. The content of the conference should not be a mystery to the student, and the student should be informed of the nature and highlights of the conference (many schools are including students in parent/teacher conferences). Incidentally, children love trivia and delight in personal observations such as, "Now I know where you get that lovely red hair." A simple conference report can give a student a sense of team effort on the part of the parents and teachers. The child's feeling that a cohesive team is working for his/her benefit can produce feelings of trust and security.

SHARE INFORMATION

Often data is collected in conferences that should be shared with other school personnel: Changes in addresses, phone numbers or work hours should be given to the office; the counselor should be notified of changes in family structure (marital status, birth, etc.) or other factors that may affect a child's school performance; and information pertaining to health should be forwarded to the school nurse. Don't forget to share positive information with appropriate personnel (e.g., tell the music teacher about Terri's singing a solo with her church choir). A teacher needs to be sensitive about the data that is obtained through conferences. Is this confidential information? When in doubt--ask! The parent may have intended the information to go no further than the teacher and, as a team member, has the right to expect this wish will be respected. A simple: "Do you mind if I share this information with Mrs. Brown, our counselor?" should provide the necessary guidelines.

MARK THE CALENDAR

Teachers are very busy people with a multitude of things to remember, and since conference time is a particularly busy time, noting future obligations on your professional calendar can make life simpler.

Directly following the conference, all commitments should be marked on a calendar. Did you promise to call the parent(s) on Friday afternoon to report on reading progress? Or have you set a date for a follow-up conference? Be certain as soon as possible to note the task on your calendar.

CONCLUSION

Teachers and parents have the potential for forming a team that can work to the child's benefit. By attention to pre-conference, conference and post-conference activities, the teacher can greatly increase the chances of building effective parent/teacher teams for each of the children in the class.

Terri Johnson is feeling surprisingly happy considering that it is the day after parent/teacher conferences. Following past conferences her parents would predictably say, "Young lady, there are going to be some study changes around here," which would be followed by a list of impossible demands, two weeks of frustration, and no real changes.

This morning at breakfast, Terri's parents had been proud of her good work and of the positive things Mr. Smith had said about her; and Mr. Smith and her parents had developed a plan of action to help her with some problem areas. Terri has the feeling that this time there will be some real changes.

CONFERENCE CHECKLIST*

PRE-CONFERENCE

_____ 1. Notify
--Purpose, place, time, length of time allotted

_____ 2. Prepare
--Review child's folder
--Gather examples of work
--Prepare materials

_____ 3. Plan agenda

_____ 4. Arrange environment
--Comfortable seating
--Eliminate distractions

CONFERENCE

_____ 1. Welcome
--Establish rapport

_____ 2. State
--Purpose
--Time limitations
--Note taking
--Options for follow-up

_____ 3. Encourage
--Information sharing
--Comments
--Questions

_____ 4. Listen
--Pause once in awhile!
--Look for verbal and nonverbal cues
--Questions

_____ 5. Summarize

_____ 6. End on a positive note

POST-CONFERENCE

_____ 1. Review conference with child, if appropriate

_____ 2. Share information with other school personnel, if needed

_____ 3. Mark calendar for planned follow-up

* University of New Mexico Institute for Parent Involvement, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1979.

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Introducing the Author

Mary Lou Fuller is a member of the faculty at the Center for Teaching and Learning. As a former elementary teacher and school psychologist, she was instrumental in co-authoring and implementing a parent volunteer program and in conducting workshops for parents. She continues to be involved in school/home relationships through writing, research, workshops and presentations.

INSIGHTS is published eight times during the academic year by the Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Dakota.

Subscriptions are $3.50 per year payable by check or money order to INSIGHTS, Center for Teaching and Learning, Box 8158, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202
Editor - Clara A. Pederson

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